

The Power of Digital Storytelling

Today's technology allows students and faculty to tell stories in powerful ways. The digital camera, editing software, and media outlets means that anyone can tell their story. Not only can they tell their story, but share a curricular concept, help in staff development, or create publicity for the school. With all of this capacity to create powerful stories, we need to remember what makes great stories for audiences. We should think about how story telling helps students learn.

We all learn and tell stories. Some of them make us laugh, some make us cry, and some help us share useful information. In today's media we are inundated with scores of sub-plots, plots, and messages that can overwhelm the senses. It's easy to become a mental couch potato and forget the art of creating story. Students need to be able to see themselves as producing good content. They need to know how and be able to tell stories. They also need to learn how to teach story telling.

Story telling is not new. Many books on brain research and learning talk about how our brains are hard wired for narrative. Short term. Long term. The structure, content, and elements of stories give authors handy tools to teach brains to think. Good teaching that helps students think is usually good storytelling. The teacher/storyteller knows the content, sizes up the audiences, and gives a great delivery. Good stories and good teaching can get even the most reluctant brain working.

Students' brains watch a lot of stories through electronic media. TV commercials probably make up more of the "content" of a child's mental diet than we care to know. We need to give the same tools of this "digital storytelling" to students and combine it with great teaching methods to help students tell their own powerful stories.

They must learning storyboarding, elements of a story, videography, video editing, and publishing techniques to be digital storytellers. Like writing it's nearly impossible to create digital stories without thinking. Students become producers of stories, digital content and thought.

Many regions and countries have film festivals that share content and thought. Does your school have it's own Sundance? In Alaska we have created a digital film contest called "IdidaMovie." It honors and encourages students story telling through digital media. For over three years students

and teachers have created hundreds of Quicktime movies making audiences laugh, teaching us new things, telling stories, and sharing what it's like to teach and learn in Alaska. "IdidaMovie" has been a powerful way for students and teachers to share knowledge, important teaching, and culture.

It's helpful for digital film festivals to provide incentives for students and teachers. Alaska's "IdidaMovie" awards eight roundtrip airline tickets to Hawaii in the summer to the winning teams' schools. Hawaii's "IslandMovie" will award a similar number of tickets to Hawaiian schools to visit Alaska. The Northwest Council for Computer Education's (NCCE) "Digitalkies" contest awards technology prizes to schools. These regional contests encourage digital storytelling and knowledge sharing among diverse student populations, skills, and interests.

Digital stories focus on a range of topics. Students can share personal experiences, concentrate on a curricular standard or concept, create staff development material, and/or explain a part of school culture. Stories about personal experiences give students a chance to share hopes, fears, and feelings. Curriculum concepts, such as the Bernoulli Principle, create student-generated explanations of information that students should know or be able to do. High teacher turnover means schools need to build teaching orientation materials for new staff. Student-generated explanations of homework procedures or a refresher on "Bloom's taxonomy" becomes part of the school's welcome package. School culture movies include important parts of school expectations such as a "truth rubric" that explains the schools standards for how information and references in research reports are considered acceptable or "truthful."

Digital tools give students and teachers powerful ways to tell their stories with a range of audiences. The power of digital storytelling comes from sharing knowledge, feelings, and experiences within a community of learners. Digital stories teach diverse viewpoints, help shape school culture, and allow students to actively share knowledge using today's media. Students must learn these tools and the art of digital story telling to be effective at sharing knowledge. Learning the digital tools comes quickly to students. But when students need help shaping information and ideas into powerful presentations, they have a friendly and expert storyteller nearby-their teacher.